

Japanese Studies at De La Salle University

著者	Trinidad Dennis D.
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Japanese Studies at De La Salle University

Dennis D. Trinidad¹

I joined the International Studies Department of De La Salle University as a faculty member in 2004. Since then, I have served as coordinator of its Japanese Studies program. Hence, what I will describe in this paper is based on my eight years of experience of handling the program.

Because Japanese studies at De La Salle University is relatively new, conducting research and teaching courses on Japan are challenging tasks. The Japanese Studies program comes under the organizational umbrella of the College of Liberal Arts. It was first offered in the 1983–1984 academic year as an academic degree program in the History-Political Science Department. In 1992, it was transferred to the newly created International Studies Department which became its permanent home.

At present, the Department offers and manages two degree programs in Japanese Studies. At the undergraduate level, we offer a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies with a major in Japanese Studies. This is one of three areas that students in the International Studies program can specialize in, with the other two being European Studies and American Studies. In several universities, the counterpart of our international studies programs is international area studies.

The other program offered is a Master's degree in Asian Studies with a major in Japanese Studies, which was first introduced in 1998. The Japanese Studies program at the undergraduate level is heavily oriented toward international relations and politics, although students are also required to take specialized courses in humanities such as Japanese literature, Japanese philosophy and religion, and Japanese language. On the other hand, the Master's program is more interdisciplinary in nature, although students can choose to specialize in one of three tracks: social sciences, humanities, or general. When a student chooses to specialize in the general track, he or she will take a combination of social sciences and humanities courses. Those who opt for the more specific track (for example, humanities) may only enrol in courses related to their chosen field (for instance, ancient and contemporary Japanese literature and the like).

Over the past eight years the number of students enrolled in the undergraduate Japanese Studies program has increased. The number of students enrolled during the

1 Associate Professor of De La Salle University.

2011–2012 academic year was almost four times that of 2004–2005. The real challenge is attracting enough students to our Master's program. Since 2004, the average number of applicants for the Master's program has only been about 4 students per academic year. This is perhaps due to the fact that there are few institutional incentives to become a Japanese studies specialist in the Philippines. Very few universities offer Japanese studies or Japan-related courses. Hence, there is no incentive to pursue or specialize in Japanese studies. Those who are in the program but are not interested in the teaching track are either undecided as to what career path to follow or opt to take the risk that they will land a teaching position after completing some of their coursework. The undergraduate students who are in the Japanese Studies program are mostly interested in Japanese society and in traditional and pop culture. Many of them hope to join the foreign service or work in a Japanese company after earning their degree.

Overall, the Japanese Studies programs at both the graduate and undergraduate levels face several serious organizational and human resource-related challenges. Faculty members who teach in the program belong to various departments at De La Salle University (for example, faculty responsible for Japanese literature come from the Literature Department, those who teach Zen Buddhism come from the Philosophy Department, and so on). There is no clear line of authority between them and the coordinator of the Japanese Studies program or the chairperson of the International Studies Department. This lack of clear organizational boundaries prevents them from charting the future direction of the program.

I, as coordinator, consult or confer with them on matters pertaining to teaching assignments and other similar concerns. In terms of human resources, the program has a rather limited pool of scholars. Currently, all faculty members who teach in the program are either former Japanese government scholars and/or did postdoctoral fellowships in Japan. Despite this experience, none of them is very fluent or proficient in Nihongo. Aside from the Japanese language teachers, the other faculty members need some sort of special training to hone their Japanese language abilities. Of course, their linguistic challenges do not prevent them from being productive and competent in research or teaching. There is also a lack of teachers who have Ph.D. degrees either in Japanese society and culture or Japanese language education. To the best of my knowledge, there is no university in the Philippines at the moment that offers a Ph.D. degree in Japanese society and culture or Japanese language education. When a need arises for these specialists, one possible solution is to recruit someone who has a Ph.D. or Master's degree in sociology and focuses on society and culture of Japan in his/her research. This is rare, however. To diversify faculty line-up in terms of areas of specialization, another strategy that we adopted in recent years is to invite professors to visit from Japan to teach

special Japanese Studies courses.

On the other hand, our Japanese language teachers receive regular training from the Japan Foundation in Manila. It is also common to invite Japanese volunteers who live in the Philippines who would like to participate in conversation classes. At present, the program has about eight area specialists. Of these, four have Ph.D. degrees, two have Master's degrees and two are M.A. candidates. The areas in Japanese Studies that these eight faculty members represent are: Philippines-Japan relations, Japanese politics and foreign policy, Japan-Southeast Asia/ASEAN economic relations, the Japanese economy, Japanese literature, Zen Buddhism, and Japanese language teaching.

In the area of research, all eight faculty members are active in presenting papers at local and international conferences. A number of papers (especially those of senior faculty members) had also been submitted and published in internationally refereed and/or abstracted journals. Many of these papers tackle Japan's foreign policy, official development assistance, economic development, comparative studies of Japan and the Philippines and contemporary Japanese literature. Other forms of publications include books and monographs. Except for language teachers, English is the medium for those whose papers had been published.

As for resources, the University library has very few holdings on Japan. There is no section or space in the library that is reserved exclusively for Japan-related books and other resources. The materials are scattered throughout different sections of the library. We also do not have a resource center for Japanese Studies. However, for the past five years, the International Studies Department through its Japanese Studies program has applied for and received library support from the Japan Foundation in Manila in the form of books and journals on Japan. Donated materials are handed to the library for safe-keeping. We plan to develop a Japanese Studies Resource Center in the next few years where we can put together all collections that are related to Japan. The main impediment to this plan is the availability of space in the library where such a resource center can be housed. It would also require a sustainable source of funding for the recruitment and maintenance of personnel who will manage the center and consistent supply of materials.

De La Salle University has signed a memorandum of understanding and agreements with several universities in Japan to create exchange student programs. Many of our undergraduate and graduate students have participated in one or all of these exchanges. For this academic year, we have students on exchange at Sophia University, Osaka University, Hokkaido University, and Waseda University. Some of our students who became fluent in Nihongo applied eventually for Japanese government scholarships after completing their degrees.

Undergraduate students also have a campus-based organization called Nihon Kenkyūkai or NKK. This organization has been instrumental in promoting Japanese culture on campus through activities like flower arrangement, tea ceremony and even cosplaying. Although exchange programs for faculty members with memorandums of agreement are limited, our teachers regularly visit Japan for purposes of training, research, and professional growth through various fellowship and scholarship schemes.

Since 2004, the Japanese Studies program and International Studies Department have been active in sponsoring or co-sponsoring local and international conferences and expanding its networks. The Japan Foundation in Manila and the Japan Information and Culture Center, Embassy of Japan in Manila have been our partners in the pursuit of enriching Japanese Studies in De La Salle University and the Philippines as a whole. They also offer study and exchange programs to our students on a regular basis.